

The Parish Church of St Mary the Virgin Henley-on-Thames

Report to the Town Meeting, April 2021

It scarcely needs to be said that this has been a strange year for our parish church, as it has been for all of us in one way or another. We began 2020 with great hope, with a number of new initiatives such as BATS (our baby and toddler group) and our Sunday evening youth group showing signs of growth, and we were beginning to make plans for the expansion of our ministry team. But then in March we found ourselves in lockdown, and not only was the church building locked to parishioners, and worship suspended, but even I as the parish priest was forbidden by the Archbishop to enter the church for private prayer or to film services, and so I was reduced to trying to offer the liturgy in my garden, and cajoling various members of my family into filming it so parishioners could participate through watching the services on youtube!

The focus of our work as a parish had to be very quickly reconfigured, and I became very busy with funerals. Particularly during the first lockdown, it was very difficult for people to grieve in the usual way, with only a handful of people permitted to attend funerals, and other social contact highly restricted. So funeral ministry became more than usually important over the last year.

We have also taken the opportunity to improve parish communications, by introducing a weekly email to update people on what is going on in church, including links to online worship. If anyone wishes to receive this email, they should email me: rector.hwr@btinternet.com.

Support for local charities has also continued to be an important focus.

Services at St Mary's restarted as soon as they were permitted under government rules, and we have continued to remain open for regular services as far as we have been allowed to do so, both on Sundays and during the week, and also for private prayer, in careful accordance with regulations and guidance.

On the fabric of the building and churchyard, the past year has brought certain challenges.

In January 2020 our boiler gave up, and has now been replaced with a modern system which we hope will reduce our carbon footprint, not to mention our gas bill, and visitors to St Mary's will appreciate that the church is a little warmer than most people would dare to hope from such a large and ancient building. This is important both for our regular worshippers, and for the many concerts and similar events that we host.

Many Henley residents will have noted the unhappy condition both of the Red Lion steps and the railing of the raised footpath along the south side of the church. A lot of time and energy has gone into resolving these problems, and some funds have been committed, but the results are so far not what we would like them to be. The problems are complex.

The path along the south side of the church is a part of the historic churchyard, and our view has always been that since closed churchyards are the responsibility of the district council, SODC should maintain this path and the associated railings, and in the past they have done so. They are now no longer willing to do this, and because the railings have in parts become dangerous, St Mary's have committed funds to make the necessary repairs. Detailed plans are currently being worked up by our architect, and we should see progress before long.

The Red Lion steps are sadly more complex still, because no-one knows who owns them. It would be tempting just to go ahead and make the necessary repairs regardless, but if we do so it will raise a number of legal difficulties. In the past these too have been maintained by SODC. We have by no means given up on finding a solution, but I cannot promise any rapid progress.

Financially it has been a challenging year, as we have lost significant income streams – wedding fees, concert bookings and so forth – but our regular congregation have been incredibly generous. The coming year continues to hold huge uncertainties for us as for just about everyone else.

But all in all St Mary's is in good heart, and we look forward to a further reopening and relaxation of rules. The return of the choir and children's groups will be major steps, and we hope to be able to return to the trajectory we thought we were on at the beginning of 2020, embedding new work with families, children and young people, and looking to expand the ministry team, so that we might more fully serve the people of this town, to the praise and glory of God.

The Revd Jeremy Tayler, Rector